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Religious and Economic Reform: The Gaidinliu Movement and the Heraka in the North Cachar Hills¹

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Abstract

The Heraka or Gaidinliu Movement among the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills, Assam, provides a case of millenarian activities based on agrarian reforms. The movement is associated with opposing British rule during the 1930s until India's Independence in 1947 under the guidance of Jadonang and later Gaidinliu. I examine the genesis of the movement which was based on agrarian reform by linking it with the influx of Kuki people and the effect of British land policy on Zeme agricultural practices which caused land shortages and famine. I argue that the Heraka Movement provided an alternative by abolishing certain rituals associated with the agricultural cycle and this in turn changed the social hierarchies and the worldview of the Zeme.

Key words: Millenarianism, rationalisation, reform, cycle migration, sacrifice.

Introduction

The Gaidinliu Movement and the Heraka,² as it came to be known in later years, spread through the North Cachar Hills, Assam, from the 1930s onwards. It had a reformist message which aimed to alter the rituals associated with the swidden or slash and burn agricultural cycle. I argue that the reforms were mainly in response to the scarcity of

¹ This paper was first presented at the 2006 European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies, organised by the European Association for South Asian Studies (EASAS) at Leiden University (Panel 28: Ethnicity and development: tribes and small peoples of India). I am grateful to Tahulung and Adeule for helping me understand the 'Zeme world'. I am thankful to Paul Streumer, Mohan Gautam, Lindsay Graham, Jeanne Openshaw, Amanda Bowden, Mark Turin, Steven Sutcliffe, Vibha Joshi and Erik de Maaker for their comments and feedback.

² Almost 60 percent of the Zeme are followers of Heraka. The census reports conflates Heraka into the 'Hindu' or 'other religion' category. *Census of India 1991, Series 4, Assam (Delhi: Controller of Publications, 1991)*.

food, and to alleviate what Michael Adas calls feelings of ‘frustrated hope’.³ The Heraka called for a reduction in animal sacrifices associated with various agricultural rituals.

But the initiative had major repercussions. This was a society governed by the rituals of the agricultural cycle. Altering them not only altered the lives of the villagers but also affected their worldview. I argue that this change occurred primarily due to two interrelated reasons. Firstly, the Zeme practice of ‘cycle migration’, which meant migrating from one village location to another, cultivating and then abandoning the site for a period of time so as to obtain the optimum agricultural yield, and also as a protection against any diseases that an older site might have been associated with. Secondly, the settling of Kuki people in Zeme land at the behest of British colonial officers, who were not aware of the Zeme system of ‘cycle migration’ and agricultural practices, caused land shortages which affected the Zeme economy.⁴ The paucity of new sites for swidden cultivation, and an inability to return to the older sites (which were now occupied by the Kuki people) led to low agricultural yields and an ensuing shortage of food. The Heraka Movement was able to capitalise on the resulting widespread dissent by suggesting the alteration of rituals and promises of a ‘golden age’ of material prosperity. However this alteration of rituals affected the village organisation and the social hierarchy—as I shall discuss below.

The Heraka is a religious reform⁵ movement derived from the ancestral practice known as Paupaise.⁶ It was taken up by the Zeme during the period of British colonialism in the

³ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp.202–3. He uses this term in the context of the Saya San rebellion in Burma between 1931 and 1941.

⁴ The Kukis are a nomadic people who belong to the same ethnic group as the Chins of Myanmar and the Lushai of Mizoram. See G.A Grierson (ed.), *Linguistic Survey of India. Vol. 3, Tibeto-Burman Family. Part. 3, Specimens of the Kuki-Chin and Burma Groups* (Calcutta: Supt. of Government Printing, India, 1904). Specifically, the word ‘Kuki’ could also apply to those who were driven from the Lushai and Chin Hills to the north and west. See N. Joykumar Singh, *Colonialism to Democracy: A History of Manipur 1819–1972* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2002), p.44.

⁵ I use the term ‘reform’ here in its more varied notion meaning an advancement, progress, a moving forward, but also reverting to older, more traditional ways. Also see Joseph L. Blau, ‘Reform’, in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion: Volume 12* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp.238–44.

⁶ The Paupaise population is now negligible, comprising only about 12 households (60 people) in Hezeilo village.

North Cachar Hills of Assam in India.⁷ Heraka literally means to build a fence (*ka*) to keep the smaller gods (*bera*) away. Prior to 1974, the Heraka was known by various names, for example the Gaidinliu Movement, Periese (old practice), Kelumse (prayer practice) and Ranise (practice of the queen, a reference to Gaidinliu as the people's queen), all representing a different point in the trajectory of the movement which came to be known as Heraka in 1974.⁸

Geography and Context

The Zeme consider themselves a 'Naga tribe'⁹ and are also related to the Tengimae group.¹⁰ The Zeme villages are located in contiguous areas of three north-eastern states: Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Owing to the boundary demarcations carried out during the colonial period (1834–1947), the Zeme have always been disjointed.¹¹ But they desired a unified administrative area within the Indian Union, a demand which was championed by the Heraka leader Gaidinliu, who from the 1960s to the 1970s headed a pan-tribal union known as the Zeliangrong Movement.¹² The Heraka movement had come into conflict with Naga nationalist groups who had been demanding the creation of

⁷ The Zeme (also spelt Nzemi, Zemei) were known as Kacha Nagas in colonial times. They were one of the first 'Naga' tribes the British encountered in the North Cachar Hills. The word 'Naga' is used nowadays to portray a supposedly unified 'culture' that encapsulates common characteristics of different 'hill tribes' for nationalistic reasons. For a detailed study on the Nagas see Julian Jacobs, Sarah Harrison and Anita Herle, *The Nagas: Hill Peoples of Northeast India—Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1998); and also Vibha Joshi in this volume.

⁸ It is unclear how Gaidinliu was known during the 1930s, but nowadays she is referred to as a prophet.

⁹ The word 'tribe' is filled with conceptual problems with its vague terrain of representation, but is still used as a valid discourse in India due to the protective discrimination accorded to those listed in the Schedule of Tribes (Article 342 of the Indian Constitution). So, my use of the word 'tribe' here is solely for uniformity as it corresponds with the 'schedule list'.

¹⁰ See the article by Vibha Joshi in this volume.

¹¹ The three areas were known as the Naga Hills (which went on to become Nagaland), North Cachar Hills (which remained under Assam) and Tamenglong (which stayed with Manipur state). For an early description see Alexander Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1979); and for a detailed discussion on this matter since ancient times see Gangmumei Kamei, *History of the Zeliangrong Nagas: From Makbel to Rani Gaidinliu* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 2004), pp.44–93.

¹² The word Zeliangrong was coined in 1947 and is a combination of the three prefixes of these 'tribes': Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei (Ze-liang-rong). See Gangmumei Kabui, 'The Zeliangrong Movement: An Historical Study', in K.S. Singh (ed.), *Tribal Movements in India Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1982), p.53. See also D.P. Mukherjee, P. Gupta and N.K. Das, 'The Zeliangrong or Haomei Movement', in K.S. Singh and K. Suresh (eds), *Tribal Movements in India Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1982), pp. 67-96.

a separate Naga state.¹³ Currently, the Zeme support the demand of 'Greater Nagalim' (which includes Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Myanmar) by the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) as a way of fulfilling their earlier vision of a unified home.¹⁴

I focus on the Zeme of the eastern region of the North Cachar Hills district in Assam state and the western region along the Meghalaya border. The Zeme constitute the second largest 'tribal' group in the district, preceded by the Dimasas, and followed by the Hmar and Kuki.¹⁵ Fieldwork was conducted in these two geographical regions, with bases in Laisong village and Haflong town.

Beginnings of the Heraka Movement

Between 1929 and 1931 a series of entries were made in the Administrative Reports of Manipur and Assam regarding Jadonang, a Kabui Naga, and his cousin Gaidinliu. They were accused of plotting a rebellion against the British and the Kuki settlers.¹⁶ In these reports Jadonang is referred to as a 'messiah', 'healer', '*maiba*' ('priest'), 'king' and 'spirit-king', while Gaidinliu is called '*maibi*' ('priestess') and later 'sorceress'.¹⁷ The two professed to establish a 'Naga Raj' by ousting the British and massacring the Kukis, who were seen as enemies of the Kabui and Kacha Nagas. The enmity between Kuki and the Kabui (Rongmei) and Kacha (Zeme) Nagas can be traced back to the Kuki Rebellion (1917-19), which erupted primarily against the British on the issue surrounding the recruitment of Kuki manpower for the Labour Corps during the First World War. Under the pretext of

¹³ During this period skirmishes were reported between the Naga National Council (NNC) and Gaidinliu's followers due to their different demands with respect to secession from, or incorporation into, India respectively. Another reason for the clashes was that Christians among the NNC cadres viewed the Heraka as being 'Hindu', a contention which has continued due to the close links between the Heraka and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

¹⁴ The NSCN-IM is a breakaway group from the Naga National Council which saw the signing of the 'Shillong Accord' in 1975 between the Government of India and the Naga Federal Government (or NFG, the political wing of the NNC) as a betrayal of Naga sovereignty. For a detailed study see Charles Chasie, *The Naga Imbrolio: A Personal Perspective* (Kohima: Standard Printers & Publishers, 1999).

¹⁵ According to the 2001 Census, the population of North Cachar Hills is 188,079. Zeme constitute 20 percent of the population. *Census of India, 2001, Series-19: Assam (State, District, Circle and Town)* (Guwahati: Directorate of Census Operations, 2001)

¹⁶ The Kabui have adopted the name Rongmei in recent years. They consider themselves 'Naga' and live in the states of Manipur and Assam. I will retain the usage of the word 'Kabui' because of its use in colonial administrative reports.

¹⁷ These accounts are primarily found at the India Office Library, British Library. See India Office Library Ledger P/11892 and L/P&S/13/1002.

the Rebellion, some Kuki villages allegedly attacked Kabui and Kacha villages to settle 'old scores'. This gave rise to ethnic tensions in the late 1920s and early 1930s fuelling the 'Jadonang movement'.¹⁸ From 1930–31 the Jadonang Movement launched a campaign against the British and the Manipuri Darbar which included measures such as the non-payment of the house tax, the rejection of the *pothang* system of labour,¹⁹ and disobedience towards the *lambus* (government-appointed interpreters). However, the promoters claimed that the house tax money and the tribute of *mithun* (semi wild bison, *Bos frontalis*) should be given to Jadonang, who claimed to be the new king or 'raja'.²⁰

Jadonang claimed miraculous powers and divine ordination by *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Kabui supreme being. He claimed to have experienced 'visions' and 'trances', which he said had allowed him to commune with *Tingkao Ragwang*, who 'took him to heaven' and showed him 'many of the secret things done by people before his time'.²¹ Claiming divine sanction from this encounter, and from his visits to Bhuban cave in Cachar district, Jadonang devised a set of new ritual practices based on traditional Kabui forms but closer to the Vaishnavite traditions of the dominant Meitei community of Manipur. Thus Jadonang started calling himself a *maiba* or priest in the Meitei (Manipuri) religious tradition. Again perhaps in response to Christian missionary activity,²² Jadonang advocated adoption of *Tingkao Ragwang* as the supreme god, while encouraging the abandonment of the minor local gods.²³ He also claimed to be close to the Hindu god Vishnu.²⁴ Jadonang built temples to house the new worship. These temples were later

¹⁸ For a full account see N. Joykumar Singh, *Social Movements in Manipur (1917–1951)* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1992); and John Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2005).

¹⁹ *Pothang* literally means *pot* (baggage) and *thang* (to carry). Under Manipuri law, every village had to cater for the visiting king, members of his family, and state officials when they toured the village or the region. This was abolished in 1913 with the help of the British, but the practice continued illegally in some regions.

²⁰ Kamei, *History of the Zeliangrong Nagas*, pp.152–3.

²¹ Namthiubuiyang Pamei, *The Trail from Makuilongdi: The Continuing Saga of the Zeliangrong People* (Tamenglong, Manipur: Girona Charitable Foundation, 2001), p.39.

²² During this time, Christian missions were also gaining a foothold in the region. For some Zeme, Christianity was the answer to escape the burdens of ancestral traditions while for others it was Heraka. A Zeme Christian elder told me that 'the new doctrines of Christianity lightened our minds and gave us appeasement'. Approximately 40 percent of Zeme are now Christian belonging to the following denominations: Presbyterians (25 percent); Baptist (10 percent); and Catholic (5 percent) (data collected from fieldwork).

²³ See also Richard M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.11, no.1 (1984), pp.1–43.

²⁴ Jadonang told J.C. Higgins: 'The male god in my upper temple is Vishnu (God of Preservation), the female is his wife, but I do not know her name. The Mithun in the shrine is the

destroyed by the British in their attempt to halt the progress of the movement. J.C. Higgins, the political agent of Manipur, reported complacently that destroying the temples did not interfere with the Kabui practice of ‘animistic religion’ as it was not their custom ‘to have temples for their gods’.²⁵

The ‘Jadonang Movement’ came to a halt when Jadonang was arrested by the deputy commissioner of Cachar and subsequently executed in Manipur in August 1931 on a charge of murdering two Manipuri traders—who were allegedly sacrificed to ‘his god’.²⁶ Gaidinliu, Jadonang’s cousin, then a young girl of sixteen, is said to have escaped and found refuge and support among the Zeme of the North Cachar Hills.

The Gaidinliu Movement

The historical trajectory of the Jadonang Movement is difficult to follow considering the various adjectives attributed to Jadonang (messiah, priest, shaman, healer, prophet, king, spirit king). Jadonang’s successor, Gaidinliu, on the other hand, gave millenarian direction to the movement. There is a plethora of definitions concerning millenarian activities, but Kenelm Burridge’s classic definition corresponds closely with my analysis of the Gaidinliu Movement in its psychological, political, sociological and economic aspects. Burridge defines millenarian movements as ‘the adoption of new assumptions, a new redemptive process, a new politico-economic framework, a new mode of measuring the man, a new integrity, a new community: in short, a new man. A precondition of this regeneration is dissatisfaction with the current system’.²⁷

bull of Mahadeo. I heard all about these things from the “fukir” [fakir] at the Bhuvan Hills temple—a foreigner, not a Manipuri. I first heard of this “fukir” in a dream’. Higgins’ File, Ms 95022 15: 11-18 (School of Oriental and African Studies).

²⁵ India Office Library Ledger P/11892, No.64.

²⁶ There is various speculation on the exact nature of the charges and whether they were politically motivated by the British government to break up the movement. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this but for further analysis see Kamei, *History of the Zeliangrong Nagas*, p.155-57; and India Office Library Ledger L/P&S/13/1002, Folio 441–446; L/P&S/13/1002, Folio 665–667; and Higgins File, MS 95022, 15: 11–18 (School of Oriental and African Studies Archives).

²⁷ Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p.13. For a general survey of messianic movements in India see Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1965). For a more general review of millenarian movements across the globe see Carole A. Myscofski, *When Men Walk Dry: Portuguese Messianism in Brazil* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Sylvia L. Thrupp (ed.), *Millennial Dreams in Action* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1962); and Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest Among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973).

The arrival of a 'hero' is usually seen as the first step to finding a 'messiah' or 'prophet' for this 'new redemptive process'.²⁸ The way this 'new redemptive process' unfolds can vary however. It can be a process of 'revival' or 'revitalisation',²⁹ rather than just a response to the present condition. Other scholars emphasise the notion of 'nativism'.³⁰ This is a strategy that attempts to revive aspects of a 'golden past' as a reaction against the dominant cultural discourse. Yet a third approach takes as its starting point the millenarian phenomenon of the 'cargo cult'.³¹ Finally millenarian activities are sometimes interpreted by Marxists as a basic or archaic form of class struggle.³²

The Gaidinliu Movement fits several of these paradigms. It incorporated myths of a 'golden age' that sought to attract people who were experiencing famine and loss of ownership of land as a result of population pressure on land caused by Kuki immigrants. It promised that prosperity could be attained through prayers to *Zailad*, the Zeme lake god and to the Zeme sky god, *Tingwang*. It claimed that signs of this 'golden age' would appear when the taxes paid to the British government were paid instead to Gaidinliu, and when the Kukis were driven away from Zeme land. Its message was spread through the medium of songs which cleverly wove together powerful themes and stories of mythic heroes such as Amang, an ingenious orphan, and sacred landscapes, such as ponds along the Barak River, to evoke a sense of the 'golden past'. For example a popular song from this period entitled 'Kedeirei se Keli Wang Jeu' ('The World has Changed') celebrated the changes that were taking place and prophesied a future replete with joy, freedom and abundance.

These visions and themes continued to be important even after Gaidinliu was arrested in 1932 and imprisoned for eighteen years. The reforms were carried forward by Gaidinliu's

²⁸ Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth*, pp.3, 11–12.

²⁹ Anthony F. Wallace, 'Revitalization Movements', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol.58 (1956), pp.264–81.

³⁰ Ralph Linton and Irving A. Hallowell, 'Nativistic Movements', in *American Anthropologist*, n.s., Vol.45, no.2, Centenary of the American Ethnological Society (Apr.–Jun 1943), pp.230–40; and Norman L. Friedman, 'Nativism', in *Phylon*, Vol.28, no.4 (4th Qtr. 1967), pp.408–15.

³¹ Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth*; and Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (London: Paladin, 1970).

³² Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (trans. Lisa Sergio) (London: Macgibbon & Kee Ltd., 1963); and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1965).

lieutenants, some of whom claimed miraculous healing powers—and who thus attracted a large following. British administration, however, did not see anything positive coming out of these ‘mediums’ or ‘prophets’. In the view of J.H. Hutton, the local British political agent, the agitation had only provided false hope to the villagers.³³

Understanding the Problem

The Gaidinliu Movement combined emotive appeal with the devising of reforms that were practical and which appealed to the Zeme people through a reworking of Zeme ancestral rituals. But to make the reforms effective, the Gaidinliu leaders had to address both Zeme religious practice and the economic problems of the region. To this end they focussed on rituals connected with the agricultural cycle, which comprised a series of animal sacrifices and ‘non- working’ days (*nrei*).

Sacrifices were made not only to appease the various deities, but also to underpin feasts of merit (*ka hingkuibe*) after the harvest. The performance of a series of such feasts earned the man and his wife social credit.³⁴ However, the rituals also required a restriction on the movement of people outside the demarcated geographical area (such as the family house, village ward or entire village); this was connected to *nenbe* (prohibition) and *nrei* (non-working days). Such restrictions would limit the mobility of villagers. When education was introduced in Zeme areas these restrictions became a problem, as schools were located outside the village boundaries.³⁵ The Gaidinliu Movement responded to this problem by eliminating the tradition of animal sacrifices and, with it, the restrictions on physical movement. This was one of the reasons that people converted to the Heraka Movement. As Heraka, they could venture out of the village, get education and find jobs. Any ensuing economic success was related to the blessing of the Zeme sky god *Tingwang*.

The Burdens of Social Rank and Communal Wealth

Since the 1930s the reform message of the Gaidinliu Movement has spread to most Zeme villages. In the process, earlier physical symbols of Paupaise (ancestral religious practice) had been replaced by new and supposedly superior ideas. Ursula Graham Bower (later known as U.V.G. Betts), who spent a long period with the Zeme in the

³³ J.H. Hutton Ms. Box 2 (Pitt Rivers Museum Archive, Oxford).

³⁴ See Vibha Joshi and Stuart Blackburn in this volume.

³⁵ Schools were started primarily by the Christian churches (Catholic and Presbyterian) and the British government in the townships of Haflong, Mahur, Maibong and Asalu.

North Cachar Hills during the 1930s and 1940s, wrote voicing her obvious displeasure, that the monoliths that had been traditionally important in Zeme society were being destroyed 'at the instance of Gaidiliu'.³⁶ For the reformists these monoliths represented an 'old' way of life, which they saw as a hindrance to their message.

The monoliths were erected during major celebrations and feasts of merit. The aim of a feast of merit was to enable a person to gain social status by sharing his wealth with the rest of his community.³⁷ For instance, in traditional village organisation the wealthiest would perform feasts that required the construction of large houses called *kumarumki*, *kapeoki*, and *bekuiki*.³⁸ These houses could only be built in sequence, the second only once the first had been completed, and so on. This required large expense as each house usually took a year to complete; the performance of feasts also gave the feast-giver status and prestige in his village.³⁹ Yet while the feast-giver gained merit, because of the huge expense involved his economic wealth was correspondingly reduced, thus reintegrating him into mainstream society.⁴⁰ Thus, just as feasts were a mechanism to convert material wealth into social rank,⁴¹ it could also be said that the reverse is true.⁴²

³⁶ Mr. J.P. Mills' Tour Diary for March, 1927, Mrs. U.V.G. Betts' Manuscripts 7.23 (Pitt Rivers Museum Archive, Oxford).

³⁷ Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas: Head-Hunters of Assam in Peace and War* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1946), p.52.

³⁸ These large houses were constructed primarily for display with the help of many men, a labour force which only the wealthy could provide. Many could perform only one feast, the *kumarumki*, because the next feast involving the building of a *kapeoki* would have required double the wealth. As for the final feast, Bower remarks, 'no specimen of hekwi-ki (*bekuiki*) existed, and it was doubtful whether the ritual formulae of this feast survived in the Central Nzemi (Zeme) area'. U.V.G. Betts, 'Village Organisation among the Central Nzemi Nagas', Masters Diploma in Anthropology, University College London, 1950, p.70 (Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge). The last *kumarumki* was performed in 1941 as recorded by Betts (p.83). Post-1941 no one living has ever seen any of these feasts; only stories and songs of them remain.

³⁹ The feast-giver could become a *hangseoki kazeipeo* (warden of the young men's house) or he may be chosen as *kedeipen* (landowner) (*ibid.*, p.71). See also Vibha Joshi, 'Christian and Non-Christian Angami Naga with Special Reference to Traditional Healing Practices', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 2001), p.66.

⁴⁰ Aglaja Stirn and Peter van Ham, *The Hidden World of the Naga: Living Traditions in Northeast India and Burma* (Munich: Prestel, 2003), p.102. See also Betts, 'Village Organisation Among the Central Nzemi Nagas', pp.67–72. The feast-giver can adorn body cloths with decorations signifying their merit status, which are often passed down to their children.

⁴¹ Other symbols among the other Naga tribes were, for example, the erected Y-shaped posts symbolising the female genital organ, or two stones laid in parallel positions that symbolise male and female. These symbols of fertility elevated the status of the individual in a way that was transmitted to posterity. See Jacobs *et al.*, *The Nagas: Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*, pp.77–8. See also J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp.370–96.

⁴² In some feasts of merit where there was a strong structure of hierarchy, the individuals managing power would manipulate the system to enhance their own social status. For example

Associated with the feast were sacrifices, *nrei* (non-working days), and *neube* (prohibitions accompanying a rite, such as abstinence from sexual activity, restrictions on travel, etc.) that transformed the feast into a work of merit.⁴³ A *neube* was often linked with the sacrifice of an animal such as a chicken, cow or *mithun* depending on the occasion. With the advent of education, however, these prohibitions became a problem, as most of the schools were located outside the village boundaries. As mentioned earlier, this was one of the reasons people converted to Heraka.⁴⁴ As Heraka, they could venture out of the village, get an education and find jobs. Being Heraka eased the social burdens that being *Paupaise* required. The *Paupaise* were ill-equipped to deal with the changing world.⁴⁵

The performance of a feast of merit depended on the agricultural yield, which in turn was associated with performance of various fertility rituals for a good crop. The traditional Zeme yearly agricultural cycle required around eighty *herateube* or divinations by a shaman (female: *herakapui*, male: *herakapen*). In turn each divination required a prescribed number of sacrifices intended to appease the gods and so enhance the efficacy of the ritual. Conversely a failure to carry them out, or to carry them out correctly, could have dire consequences for the village, necessitating further sacrifices. Consequently, spending on sacrifices tended to be lavish. Such a scale of investment was, for most people, unaffordable during the 1930s because of the pressure on agriculture due to British land policy and Kuki immigration (see below). Therefore, Gaidinliu banned sacrifices of larger animals while strategically allowing continued performances of those involving fowls.⁴⁶ The ban also extended to the installation of monoliths as symbols of status and those who were connected with it—the landowner (*kedeipen*)⁴⁷ and the priest (*tingkopau*). This meant Gaidinliu’s reformers had to devise a way to replace the

among the Thendu Konyak, the feasts of merit were monopolised by the Great Ang clans, or chiefs, using them to enhance their own power. See Jacobs *et al.*, *The Nagas: Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*, pp.78–80; and Stirn and van Ham, *The Hidden World of the Naga*, p.102.

⁴³ J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.345–50.

⁴⁴ See also Vibha Joshi this volume.

⁴⁵ The current *Paupaise* are aware of this argument and have told me on several occasions that they realise these prohibitions create many restrictions, but it is a way of life for them.

⁴⁶ The Heraka realised that sacrifices could not be banned outright but only incrementally. Big sacrifices like the killing of buffalo and *mithun* were banned, while smaller animals like hens and fowls were tolerated until 1974, when a total ban was put in place. For another example of this kind of reform, the Pau Cin Hau of the Chin Hills exhibited similar characteristics of banning sacrifices and abolishing smaller gods for one god at roughly the same time. See *The Census of India 1931*, Part. I, Chap. XI, para.135, pp.217–8, and Chap. X, para 120, pp.194–5.

⁴⁷ Also spelt *kadepeo*.

‘old’ system of landowners and priestly power. This was effectively done by creating a new non-hereditary position of *Paipen* or ‘village elder’ based on wealth.

The Organisation of Zeme Villages

In the pre-Heraka era the landowners (*kedeipen*) maintained an economy that subsisted through the use of multi-sited fields by a system of ‘cycle migration’. Along with the priest (*tingkopan*), the *kedeipen* maintained a strict ritual regimen which legitimised the importance and pattern of land ownership.

The Paupaise villages were established by the first *kedeipen* settlers who became the ‘owners’ of the land. *Kedeipen* belonged to the dominant clan of Nriame. The office was hereditary and upon the death of a *kedeipen*, it was passed on to the oldest member of the extended patrilineal family (*tsami*). A *kedeipen* needed considerable wealth to maintain his status within the village as he was entrusted to entertain guests. He was also required to act judiciously. Moreover a *kedeipen* received no payment for his services. Rather he had ‘to pay for the prestige that the position bestow[ed] upon him by increased hospitality’.⁴⁸ The office of the priest, on the other hand, was not hereditary and the incumbent was chosen on the basis of his knowledge of ritual and traditional practices. Only the priest had the authority to perform ritual sacrifices on behalf of his clients. The economic costs of these animal sacrifices were substantial, as they usually fell at the time of major contingencies such as illness. In spite of this, Bower reported that the people were often willing to sacrifice to avoid divine anger. The reform movement thus sought to alleviate the economic costs of sacrifice by doing away with some of the rituals.

An early account of the Zeme’s economic woes was recorded by Bower who situated their beginnings in the 1920s.⁴⁹ The failure of crops and ensuing poverty was directly linked with the British policy of allowing Kuki immigrants to settle in fallow lands involved in the Zeme agricultural cycle. The economic decline and continued Kuki migration both directly contributed to the popularity of the Gaidinliu Movement.

⁴⁸ Betts, ‘Village Organisation among the Central Nzemi Nagas’, p.48. For a detailed discussion on this see *ibid.*, pp.36–45.

⁴⁹ Ursula Graham Bower, *Naga Path* (London: John Murray, 1952). J.H. Hutton, while touring the North Cachar Hills in 1921, made a similar point, that a disastrous harvest has reduced the villages in the North Cachar Hills to abject poverty and thus applications for loans were on the rise. Hutton Ms. Box 2 (Pitt Rivers Museum Archive, Oxford).

Cycle Migration⁵⁰ and Kuki Immigration

Much of *jhum* or swidden cultivation which required clearing and burning of forests was located at some distance from the site of the Zeme villages.⁵¹ But owing to the mountainous terrain, limited land was available for cultivation. Therefore the swidden fields were scattered over a very large area—which posed problems for the security and sustenance of the villages. The answer to this dilemma was cycle migration, i.e. moving a whole village to a new site close to the area of current swidden cultivation.

The ritual associated with the establishment of a new village was that the original leaders were reinstated according to customary land ownership. In the course of time the village would move on in search of another habitat with fresh land. The old site was not abandoned though, but kept fallow along with the other relics of human habitation such as defences, house platforms, and monuments.⁵² When the new land was exhausted, the process was repeated. Depending on the size of the village, four or five sites could be exploited in rotation as its population grew.

From the mid nineteenth century onwards, Kuki settlers began to occupy the fallow land under the presumption that it had been abandoned. But the Kukis also practised swidden cultivation that constantly required new lands. The resulting encroachments and accompanying deforestation caused bitter disputes between the Zeme and the Kukis⁵³—although the Zeme blamed the British government and the Kukis equally for the reduction in cultivable land.

As the availability of cultivable land diminished, villages began to disband. For example in 1936 Asalu village was abandoned after a bad harvest followed by famine⁵⁴ which led to high infant mortality from malaria. Initially the villagers resolved to move to the older site of Gareolowa which had belonged to the *kedeipen* of Asalu. However in the

⁵⁰ Cycle migration was unique among the Zeme. Shifting cultivation and wet terrace cultivation were the other types practised by the Nagas. For further examination see von Fürer Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*, pp.78–93; and Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*, pp.72–84.

⁵¹ The steep slopes also give rise to frequent landslides brought about by the heavy monsoon and hence are inadequate for *jhuming*. Such natural disasters were also associated with the belief that continued cultivation would end in the owner's death. See Betts, 'Village Organisation among the Central Nzemi Nagas', p.119.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.122.

⁵³ Ursula Graham Bower, 'Cycle-Migration of the Zemi Nagas, North Cachar Hills, Assam', in *Man In India* (1946) p.52.

⁵⁴ Betts 'Village Organisation among the Central Nzemi Nagas', p.129.

meantime the site had been occupied by Kuki settlers. Some Asalu villagers moved to Impoi, a neighbouring village where the land was more fertile. Those who elected to stay back in Asalu watched their crops fail. With no ones' regenerated land available, the village disintegrated.⁵⁵

In an attempt to help the Zeme, the colonial government introduced wet-rice terrace cultivation (as practised by the Angami people). However the logistics of wet-rice cultivation conflicted with the traditional system of labour which was organised around reciprocity. Each member of the community worked according to the traditional customary pattern of shared labour. Terrace cultivation requires intensive labour in the building and maintenance of rice terraces, but as most Zeme villages were small, they had to depend on costly hired labour. Also many Zeme opposed this new system in the belief that untoward supernatural consequences would follow the alteration or abandonment of traditional agricultural practices.⁵⁶ For instance the Zeme associated the presence of open water in a field with illness and death. Yet another reason wet-rice cultivation failed was due to the limited availability of land suitable for terracing. Thus most Zeme villages abandoned the project half way through.⁵⁷

The Kukis, on the other hand, availed themselves of free government training for terrace cultivation and applied it expeditiously to their newly-acquired lands. Driven by famine and the low fertility of the land, the Zeme people began working as farm labourers on rice-fields owned by the Kuki and Kachari (another neighbouring non-Naga 'tribe').⁵⁸

The colonial view was that the Gaidinliu Movement was preying on the Zeme people. Bower suggests that Gaidinliu's followers made a handsome profit from 'Gaidinliu water', claiming it was a potent elixir and 'patent infallible magic' for the alleviation of sickness.⁵⁹ According to the district administrator, J.P Mills, the movement was all about acquiring 'fame'. At the same time, though, the British were worried by the degree of penetration it appeared to have achieved. J.C. Higgins, another administrator who toured the villages during the 'Gaidinliu affair', noted that he kept running into various prophets

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.128–33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.137.

⁵⁸ Bower, *Naga Path*, p.140.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44. Bower in particular was very critical of the Gaidinliu Movement during her time in the North Cachar Hills up until World War II.

and ‘mediums’. Why were they there, if not to turn the people against the government? The British assumed that the Gaidinliu Movement depended for its spread on superstition and fear. According to the British, villagers were told that any form of disobedience towards the Movement would bring harm to the family. They would not be able to share in the blessings that would unfold in the immediate future by following the Gaidinliu Movement.⁶⁰

J.H. Hutton, district commissioner of the Naga Hills, made a similarly bleak assessment in 1932 after the Jadonang and Gaidinliu uprising. Hutton commented on the lack of administration and personnel in the region and noted that some of the villages had not been toured in six years. Indeed some villages had never even been assessed due to their extreme poverty. Hutton was not surprised that the agitation had caught on so rapidly; surely any movement proclaiming some sort of hope or relief from the current distress would have been welcomed.

Since the slump they have been able to get nothing for their cotton and chillies, and many more than before have had real difficulty in raising the petty cash for their house tax. Any prophetess who promised prosperity and affluence would be bound to take on, and at first there was not necessarily anything seditious in endeavouring to profit by sending presents for a blessing.⁶¹

Was the Gaidinliu Movement a protest against an intrusive colonial government or was it a function of the widespread hardship caused by the agricultural and immigrant crisis?⁶² The irony of the message proclaimed by Jadonang and Gaidinliu—to rise up against the British and Kukis—is that it never came to fruition. Perhaps it was never intended to? Perhaps the anti-British and anti-Kuki threats were instigated to mobilise the crowd and give the villagers some means of release from frustrated hopes and disillusionment? The Gaidinliu Movement did, however, achieve precisely that.

⁶⁰ India Office Library Ledger L/P&S/13/1002, folio 636–639.

⁶¹ Hutton Ms. Box 2 (Pitt Rivers Museum Archive, Oxford).

⁶² This question is not a new one concerning how peasant societies deal with the rapid changes brought about by modernity. Millenarian activities in a way erupted due to the imbalance caused by the effects of modernity on an agrarian economy. For a detailed study of this process see Todd A. Diacon, *Millenarian Vision, Capitalist Reality: Brazil's Contestado Rebellion, 1912–1916* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Michael Taussig, ‘The Genesis of Capitalism amongst a South American Peasantry: Devil’s Labor and the Baptism of Money’, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.19, no.2 (Apr. 1977), pp.130–55.

Rebellions, uprisings, protests, says Michael Adas, are viable ways to stage a revitalisation of culture as embedded in the local idiom of the people.⁶³ Their aim is to usher in a new socio-cultural order by exploiting the ambiguities of modernity (Christianity, new systems of governance, taxes) brought in by the colonial order. But these grass-roots irruptions were not just millennial ‘flashes in the pan’—over even before one could feel their heat. Indeed they rather belie theoretical logic, because they are movements about everyday resistance that seem quixotic, but actually involve the ‘constant, grinding conflict over work, food, autonomy, ritual...’⁶⁴ Such ‘everyday forms of resistance’ became the hallmark of the Zeme Naga reformers as they tangled with traditionalists, priests, and hostile crowds, persuading them of the need to embrace these changes for survival. The reformers realised that maintaining a *laissez-faire* attitude to an indigenous economy under dire constraints would lead to widespread famine. Accordingly, they opted for change—but introduced it by slowly and subtly reforming the traditional notion of sacrifice and *nrei* and *neube* restrictions to curtail expensive rituals. But the logic of fewer sacrifices to the many local gods pointed to the adoption of one god, *Tingwang*—universal, effectual, and accessible. The religious and the economic are generally inseparable.

Later, however, more large-scale changes were embraced which led to the Zeme becoming educated, mobile, and urban. As their horizons expanded beyond the area of immediate kin, family and village, they needed to adapt further to cope with all the myriad challenges of urban life—markets, itinerant merchants, centres of learning and the growing indigenous elite among others. How was this to be achieved? This meant that society itself had to change to respond to the needs of the people.⁶⁵ The Heraka provided one avenue.

Heraka: Religious Modernising?

It is perhaps a naive misunderstanding of Max Weber’s famous thesis that Puritanism ‘caused’ capitalism.⁶⁶ Rather Weber was proposing that there is a useful relationship

⁶³ Adas, *The Burma Delta*, pp.xxii–xxiii.

⁶⁴ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p.xvi.

⁶⁵ Adas, *The Burma Delta*, p.81.

⁶⁶ Stanislaw Andreski (ed.), *Max Weber on Capitalism, Bureaucracy and Religion: A Selection of Texts* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p.3.

between the promise of heavenly rewards and the work ethic of everyday life⁶⁷ or, as in the Heraka case, of a promised prosperity through a relationship with *Tingwang*. However, this uneasy marriage of heavenly belief and work ethic was not evident early in the Gaidinliu Movement. Itinerant preachers, I was told, proclaimed that ‘grains would fall from the sky’; that ‘one will become educated by using a book as the pillow’; and that ‘one must abandon work and instead pray to *Tingwang* for untold blessings’. These ‘superstitious beliefs’, I was assured, were accepted by some people, and deterred them from seeking education. Weber considered ‘magical and superstitious’ beliefs a hindrance to economic exchange and production because they ran counter to the ‘rational’ mode of thinking.⁶⁸ Protestantism, as a ‘rational’ religion, was outwardly free of magical and superstitious traits.⁶⁹ Weber thought that for modernity to emerge, it was not enough just to eliminate magic. Rationality had to be routinised, embedded into a ‘life of good works’.⁷⁰

The changes entrenched in aspects of Heraka reform mirror in many ways the shifts from the ‘superstitious’ to the ‘rational’ theorised by Weber.⁷¹ For instance, at first Heraka workers displayed ‘indifference to wage incentives’,⁷² preferring to stick with what Weber called ‘traditional production’ or ‘primitive traditionalism’.⁷³ The Heraka reformers on the other hand clearly understood that if economic transformation was to occur, some ‘superstitious beliefs’ connected with sacrifices, restrictions (*nuebe*), and agricultural practices would have to be discarded to prepare the way for the ‘rationalisation of economic life’. Thus the Heraka’s simpler cosmology, which gave primacy to one universal god who inherited all the attributes of the other lesser gods such as *Chuprai* (the god of grain) and *Zailad* (the god of prosperity), and its

⁶⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parsons) (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2003), pp.13–31.

⁶⁸ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (trans. Ephraim Fischoff) (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965), pp.1, 207–22.

⁶⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p.105.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.117.

⁷¹ Weber’s notion of ‘rationalisation’ has been criticised by some scholars as being too narrowly formulated to deal with ‘traditional societies’. Peter Worsley in fact argues that ‘traditional action’ is not ‘irrational’; it is moreover rational if ‘one examines its application in a particular situation’. See Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p.268. In this sense, I am not suggesting a complete shift from ‘magical’ to ‘rational’ thinking within the Heraka, but Weber’s model does allow us to understand why religious and economic change was effective.

⁷² Taussig, ‘The Genesis of Capitalism amongst a South American Peasantry’, p.131.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp.132–3.

marginalisation of the role of the priest in favour of that of the *paipen*, the village elder, promoted economic change.

The Centrality of Power: Concentrated Wealth⁷⁴

This latter reform was, in turn, part of another Heraka initiative—the reworking of the village offices was hierarchised with the *paipen* given the biggest share of responsibility for village welfare. And the rules of office-holding were changed too.⁷⁵ Unlike the *kedeipen* which was a patrilineal hereditary office, the office of *paipen* was opened up, theoretically, to all—though, in practice, the honour usually fell to the wealthiest man of the village. Also, while the person who held the office of *paipen* could change, the status associated with the office remained the same.

The new importance of the *paipen* within the village organisation was significant for several reasons. First, by streamlining the power base, and placing it primarily in the hands of the *paipen*, a system of competition within the village was created. The moral was: the villagers needed to compete if they wanted to become wealthy. Second, the elevation of the *paipen* signified a shift from a largely subsistence-based agrarian economy to a market economy. This was connected with several factors: first, the fact that the land did not generate much income, with most of it occupied by outsiders; second, the emphasis on education and literacy which moved people away from the land; third, the shift from collective farming to individual enterprise. With the reorganisation of the village these bourgeois values were nurtured and encouraged.

Conclusion

The above analysis attempts to show how these interconnecting factors affected the way pre-Heraka notions of land ownership and agricultural production were connected to the village organisation led by the *kedeipen* and *tingkopan*. The Heraka provided a practical remedy for the dislocation brought by contact with the ‘outside world’. The Paupaise failed to adapt to the changing situation. The Heraka, on the other hand, successfully reworked their social fabric—and in turn found willing followers—not simply because of

⁷⁴ For this section, I am relying on contemporary oral sources collected from my fieldwork (from Jan.-July 2005) to help me understand how village organisation changed. The link between landowners, priests, and the redefinition of their roles in Heraka society became clearer.

⁷⁵ Betts, ‘Village Organisation among the Central Nzemi Nagas’, p.48.

some exemplary motives, but by addressing the fundamental issues that affected Zeme village life.

The initial millenarian activities spurred on by the Gaidinliu Movement gave rise to frustrated hopes and yearning for a 'golden age'. Yet by altering the village agricultural cycle, reducing the use of sacrifices and inculcating the notion of one god, the Gaidinliu Movement laid the foundations for the later Heraka Movement which took the further step of reforming village organisation to accommodate the economic aspect without neglecting the religious. In this respect, the earlier millenarian activities lent an emotive gloss to the reform process while the Heraka provided it with an element of rationalisation—one that could help the Zeme adapt to the changing world beyond their villages.

While this was going on, the Heraka village organisation also changed, shifting from a largely egalitarian structure to a more hierarchical form of power that rewarded the wealthy with key positions within the village. The need for this move arose from the desire of the reformers to replace success in the old system of cultivation according to a yearly agricultural cycle with a market economy relying on communal labour laws. Now, thanks to the Heraka, individual wealth is valued over communal wealth, as is clearly shown by the symbol of the *paipen*. The *paipen* embodies a sort of Weberian ideal. He makes use of exchange and production and oversees a religious rhetoric that resembles Calvinism in its insistence on 'a life of good works'. Today, in the eyes of the Zeme Naga, prosperity is bound with their relationship with *Tingwang*: the better the relationship, the belief goes, the more likely one will prosper. This symbiotic relationship between the material and the spiritual is the main legacy of the Heraka Movement.